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Notes from Underground

Fyodor Dostoevsky

Study Guide



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Summary

Key Facts

Full Title *Notes from Underground* or *Zapiski iz podpol'ya*

Privacy - Terms

Author Fyodor Dostoevsky

Type Of Work Novel

Genre Satire; social critique; fictional memoir; existential novel; psychological study

Language Russian

Time And Place Written 1863; St. Petersburg

Date Of First Publication January–April 1864

Publisher *Epoch* magazine

Narrator The anonymous narrator of *Notes from Underground* is also the novel's protagonist. The Underground Man is a bitter, reclusive forty-year-old civil servant speaking from his St. Petersburg apartment in the 1860s, though he spends the second section of the novel describing his life as a younger man in the 1840s.

Point Of View The narrator speaks in the first person, describing his own thoughts and feelings and narrating events that occurred sixteen years earlier in his life.

Tone The Underground Man is a prime example of an unreliable narrator. Because the whole novel is told through his skewed and irrational perspective, we cannot take his depictions of

events and characters at face value. We also cannot assume that the Underground Man's perspective is the same as Dostoevsky's. The author maintains a considerable distance between his view and the narrator's. Often, we see Dostoevsky satirizing an event that the Underground Man sees as very serious.

Tense The first section of the novel is told in the present tense. In the second half, the Underground Man narrates a long story from his past, telling this story in past tense with occasional present-tense commentary.

Setting (Time) Approximately 1863 in "Underground" and 1847 in "Apropos of the Wet Snow"

Setting (Place) St. Petersburg

Protagonist The protagonist is the same as the narrator, the Underground Man.

Major Conflict The Underground Man rejects many of the values and assumptions of the society in which he lives, and this conflict often manifests itself in smaller, resentful conflicts between the Underground Man and other people who represent the problems he has with society.

Rising Action The Underground Man's various attempts to interact with society, including his attempt to fight a duel, his bungled dinner with four of his school acquaintances, and his attempts to rescue a prostitute, Liza, from her life of sin

Climax Liza's positive response to the Underground Man, quickly followed by his cruel and resentful rejection of her because of his inexperience with love and kindness; Liza's departure, signifying the loss of the Underground Man's last chance to escape the underground with her

Falling Action The Underground Man's increased distancing of himself from society and further slinking into the "underground"; his resignation from his civil service job; his self-imposed isolation in his apartment; his abandonment of his youthful idealism and his desires to participate in the social world

Themes The fallacies of rationalism and utopianism; the artificiality of Russian culture; the paralysis of the conscious man in modern society

Motifs The wet snow; *l'homme de la nature et de la vérité*; the redeemed prostitute

Symbols The underground; St. Petersburg; the Crystal Palace; money

Foreshadowing The Underground Man's declaration that his idea of love is the total domination of another person foreshadows his inability to forge a relationship with Liza. The Underground Man's mention of a vague desire to make Liza pay for seeing him in a humiliating situation foreshadows his later attempts to humiliate her. (In a sense, the entire first section of the novel foreshadows the second by giving us tools to understand the Underground Man's behavior. However, the first section does not hint at the events of the second section specifically enough to be considered true foreshadowing.)

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Notes

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Character List

CHARACTERS



The Underground Man: Character Analysis

CHARACTERS



Important Quotations Explained

QUOTES



Themes

LITERARY DEVICES



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